



## Education Systems Structure

The challenges facing American Indian students in Montana must be addressed. The purpose of this Indian Education Summit brief is to highlight some research and issues related to educational systems to improve education for and about American Indians.

Facilitating change in educational systems is a complex process. Systems theory has been a part of how many American Indian cultures view the world. For example in the Dakota culture – Mitakuye Oyasin refers to the interconnectedness of life and of all things. Nurturing and developing systems change at all levels --school, community, tribal/state -- is essential to achieving reform in American Indian Education and student achievement

This Summit is convening educators and leaders from across the state to develop an action plan on how to close the achievement gap for American Indian students and ensure that schools can successfully implement Indian Education for All. It will be the collective wisdom of all the participants that will ultimately lead to developing a strong educational system that supports Indian education.

What will the story of Indian education look like in the future? Who will tell the story? Will it be much different from how it currently looks and operates? Will we be meeting in twenty years still discussing the same issues? How can we use this opportunity for dialogue and discussion to really get to the heart of the issues and effect real and ongoing change?

*"We need to be all talking about Indian Education for All as a matter of our daily work. No longer are we an afterthought. We are part of everybody's conversation – K-12, university, and governing boards/agencies. We all need to be talking from the same page and following an overall goal of improving Indian education about and for Indians. These are two of the main things we need to be doing. At the summit we will redefine these goals and it is up to us to set the goals and begin working toward them so we all are on the same page.*

(Norma Bixby, Northern Cheyenne Tribal Education Director, 2004)

## Related Issues

To help focus and frame discussions during the summit, the Indian Education Summit Planning Committee recognized the following issues as related to drop out and retention issues. They are inter-related and not meant to be all inclusive.

### ✓ Accreditation

The Montana accreditation standards include specific references to Indian education. For example: (2) In developing curricula in all program areas, the board of trustees shall consider ways to: (h) provide books and materials which reflect authentic historical and contemporary portrayals of American Indians. Even though much has been done to promote awareness, not all school personnel are aware of their obligations and where to find resources so this awareness can be translated into action. The Board of Education's Indian Education for All Committee is charged with considering ways of measuring how Indian Education for All is being implemented statewide. The five year comprehensive plans, the annual OPI data collection and the campus diversity plans provide some data but a systemic plan is lacking.

### ✓ Alternative Structures/Designs

What can be done within and outside the current school structures to foster educational reform? Is there a possibility of having schools redesigning their services based upon current levels of expertise and student needs/wants?

*"The common pattern that emerges from both existing research and the voices of teachers is that there is no single American Indian learning style, nor any combination of learning style preferences that fit all American Indian groups or individuals."*  
(Collected Wisdom, 1998)

### ✓ Delivery of Services – Regionalization

How can technical assistance be best provided to schools? What can be done to facilitate the sharing of ideas/resources among Tribal Colleges, education consortiums and the Montana University System?

## ✓ **Tribal Education Codes**

Some tribal nations have developed tribal education codes as means of infusing local tribal knowledge into the general curriculum. What role can tribal education codes play in making the educational systems more responsive to the unique needs of its community and students? What lessons can be learned from the development and implementation of tribal education codes at Ft. Peck and on the Blackfeet reservation?

## ✓ **Policies – attendance, truancy**

Research and best practices suggest that all school policies should begin with a statement about how school policies will impact students. What kinds of school policies have a significant impact upon achievement and attendance of American Indian students?

## ✓ **District structure within reservation**

It is important to recognize that each school system is unique and what works well in one area may not work in another. It has been suggested that there be one district within a reservation community – does this make sense? Can we help foster better communication between the school and community/tribe?

## ✓ **Pre-school**

Parents and School Readiness was recognized by the 1991 Indian Nations at Risk Task Force as one of the four national priorities: Develop parent-based, early childhood education programs that are culturally, linguistically, and developmentally appropriate. The K-12 system should build upon the foundation that is developed in preschool programs. Is there alignment across the board – Pre-Kindergarten – Postsecondary? If the foundation is lacking, what are we doing to provide one?

## ✓ **Stability/Consistency**

Consistency in Montana's efforts to improve Indian education, whether it is education about American Indians or education for American Indian students, is critical. What are the turnover rates of teachers and administrators in schools that serve primarily American Indian students? How are current and future school leaders provided with the necessary knowledge and skills to work in and with Indian country? Can more be done?

*"For the sake of Montana's native peoples, and as a measure of the state's dignity, it is time to stop the learned rhetoric and to start learning action in early, basic and higher education. Native American education is so far in the past that it cannot wait on the future. For most of the native peoples of Montana there is no "today" in education. The evidence is uncompromisingly clear: Native American learners are caught in a network of mutually reinforcing handicaps ranging from material poverty to racism, illness, geographical and social isolation, language and cultural barriers, defacto segregation and simple hunger. Native Americans not only need but want better schooling. They must have it, and they must have it immediately."*

(Indian Culture Master Plan, 1975)

Educators who live and work in and around Indian communities understand the need for a paradigm shift in how we view Indian perspectives and Indian ways of viewing and perceiving the world. Historically, many well intentioned efforts to "save the Indian people" through education have been unsuccessful. We must be able to acknowledge and learn from the wisdom of traditional ways of knowing and understanding as reflected by the following quote:

*"What if we turned the existing education paradigm inside out, so to speak? The essence of the new paradigm would be that all American Indian education planning begins from an Indigenous perspective. All aspects of education systems – visions, philosophy, mission, objectives, assessment, curriculum, content, instructional methodology, activities, research, and evaluation – would be rooted in traditional Native values."*

(Thomas Peacock, 2003)

What can be done within our systems (local, state and federal) to produce results that make a difference in the lives of American Indian peoples and increase knowledge and awareness of American history and culture for all Montanans?